

Were the 1945 Allied Bombings of Dresden Militarily Justified?

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Numerous historians have argued that Dresden was a legitimate military target because it was one of the greatest commercial and transportation centers in Germany. Other historians state that the Dresden bombings resulted in needless civilian deaths that were not necessary to advance the Allied cause. This article discusses whether the Dresden bombings were militarily justified.

Historical Background

The Allied bombings of Dresden created a perfect firestorm that destroyed a city whose population at just that time was swollen by tens of thousands of refugees. No one can ever say that the firestorm at Dresden was an accident, or that the decision to bomb Dresden did not originate from the highest levels of the Allied governments.^[1] The 650,000 four-pound incendiary sticks dropped on Dresden were designed to produce widespread destruction over an extremely large area of the city.^[2] Operation Thunderclap, as the bombing of Dresden and other German cities was known, did not originate merely with Sir Arthur Harris and British Bomber Command.^[3]

The British Royal Air Force (RAF) began the bombing of Dresden on February 13, 1945, between 10:13 P.M. and 10:28 P.M. They dropped a total of 881.1 tons of bombs on the central districts of Dresden during this first wave, of which 57% by weight were high-explosive bombs and 43% incendiaries. These bombs included 172 4,000-pound and 26 2,000-pound air mines designed to create huge shock waves of high-pressure air. These monster bombs blew out large numbers of windows and doors and increased the through-draft needed for the little fires from tens of thousands of stick incendiaries to spread and combine as quickly as possible.^[4]

As midnight approached, the firestorm from the bombings had the heart of Dresden in its grip, and there was very little anyone could do about it. One person later exclaimed, “The whole of Dresden was an inferno!” Most people in Dresden could not have predicted that things would get even worse.^[5]

A second wave of 550 RAF bombers—more than twice the number of the first wave—attacked other sections of Dresden from 1:21 to 1:45 A.M. A mixture of high-explosive and incendiary bombs poured down on the Grosser Garten, where Dresdeners had gathered after escaping their burning homes. The British were now bombing the dispossessed and homeless. Other new areas in Dresden hit by the second wave of RAF bombers included Löbtau and Friedrichstadt, the Südvorstadt and the Hauptbahnhof, and the suburbs of Räcknitz, Zschernitz and Plauen. An extremely big attack of incendiaries also fed the fires already created in Johannstadt and Striesen.^[6]

The RAF tactic of expanding the attacks in the second wave of bombing created a wider area of intense devastation, resulting in the greatest area of any city ever destroyed in a single night. It was this second wave of bombing outside the already-burning areas of the city which turned the raid of Dresden into a byword for slaughter. Dresden and large areas of its suburbs became killing grounds without compare.^[7] In the two raids, 796 RAF bomber aircraft had dropped a total of 2,659.3 tons of bombs, consisting of 1,477.7 tons of high-explosive bombs and 1,181.6 tons of incendiary bombs. Approximately 13 square miles of Dresden’s historic center were utterly destroyed in the attacks.^[8]

A third wave of 316 B-17s of the U.S. Eighth Air Force approached the blazing ruins of Dresden shortly after midday on February 14, 1945. This attack was followed the next day by another 211 heavy bombers from the U.S. Eighth Air Force to complete the destruction of Dresden. While the U.S. Eighth Air Force had planned to visually bomb the marshaling yard in both of these American raids, the smoke and clouds from the previous British bombings frustrated these attempts. The American raids became primarily an exercise in radar bombing, resulting in the majority of their bombs being spread over the city of Dresden. These last two American raids added an additional 1,235 tons to the total weight of bombs dropped on Dresden. [\[9\]](#)

The bombing of Dresden killed many tens of thousands of civilians and destroyed one of Europe's most beautiful and culture-rich cities. The question is: Did the destruction of Dresden have any military value?

The Case for Military Justification

Many historians say that Dresden was a legitimate military target. Dresden was by any measure an important rail hub, destination and transfer point. Three important routes of the German railway system converged at Dresden: Berlin-Prague-Vienna; Munich-Breslau; and Hamburg-Leipzig-Prague. Two main lines also connected Dresden with Leipzig and Berlin. While the Dresden-Saxony railroad system ranked only seventh in Germany in trackage, it was third in the country in total tonnage carried. [\[10\]](#)

Dresden was used as a transit point for military traffic. An American prisoner-of-war wrote after the war: "The night before the RAF/USAFF raids on February 13-14, we were shunted into the Dresden marshaling yard, where for nearly 12 hours German troops and equipment rolled into and out of Dresden. I saw with my own eyes that Dresden was an armed camp: thousands of German troops, tanks and artillery and miles of freight cars loaded with supplies supporting and transporting German logistics towards the East to meet the Russians." [\[11\]](#)

A report prepared by the USAF Historical Division Research Studies Institute Air University states:

The Eighth Air Force raids against the city's railway facilities on 14 and 15 February resulted in severe and extensive damage that entirely paralyzed communications. The city's passenger terminals and major freight stations, warehouses, and storage sheds were, when not totally destroyed, so severely damaged that they were unusable. Roundhouses, railway repair and workshops, coal stations, and other operating facilities, were destroyed, gutted, or severely damaged. The railway bridges over the Elbe river--vital to incoming and outgoing traffic--were rendered unusable and remained closed to traffic for many weeks after the raids.

The report concludes: "Dresden was a legitimate military target...The Dresden bombings were in no way a deviation from established bombing policies set forth in official bombing directives." [\[12\]](#)

The American Air Force also claimed Dresden had 110 factories, machine shops and industrial sites employing 50,000 workers that were legitimate military targets. Marshall de Bruhl writes:

These installations included dispersed aircraft factories; a poison-gas factory (Chemische Fabric Goye); an anti-aircraft and field gun factory (Lehman); and Germany's most famous optical instruments firm (Zeiss-Ikon). There were also manufacturers of electrical products and X-ray apparatus (Kock and Starzel); small arms (Seidel and Naumann); molds and metal packings (Anton Reich); gears and differentials (Saxonizwerke); and electric gauges (Gebruder Bessler). [\[13\]](#)

In justifying the Dresden bombings, British Commander Sir Arthur Harris stated: “Actually Dresden was a mass of munitions works, an intact government center, and a key transportation center. It is now none of these things.” [14]

The USAF Historical Division Research Studies Institute Air University report also justifies the bombing of Dresden:

Dresden was one of the greatest commercial and transportation centers of Germany and the historic capital of the important and populous state of Saxony. It was, however, because of its geographical location and topography and as a primary communications center that Dresden assumed major significance as a military target in February 1945, as the Allied ground forces moved eastward and the Russian armies moved westward in the great combined operations designed to entrap and crush the Germans into final defeat. [15]

The Case against Military Justification

In Alexander McKee’s opinion, Dresden was bombed for political rather than military reasons. McKee writes: “The standard whitewash gambit, both British and American, is to mention that Dresden contained targets X, Y and Z, and to let the innocent reader assume that these targets were attacked, whereas in fact the bombing plan totally omitted them and thus, except for one or two mere accidents, they escaped.” There was a tremendous amount of death and misery at Dresden, but it did not affect the war. [16]

McKee writes that the railway bridge over the Elbe was a single key point which, if knocked out, would bring rail traffic to a halt for months. However, it was not an RAF target. The rail marshaling yards and the Autobahn bridge outside of Dresden to the west were also important military targets, but they were not attacked. There was also a Waffen-SS barracks with some 4,000 German soldiers on the New Town (Neustadt) area, but this obvious military target was never attacked. [17]

McKee concludes: “The bomber commanders were not really interested in any purely military or strategic targets, which was just as well, for they knew very little about Dresden; the RAF even lacked proper maps of the city. What they were looking for was a big built-up area which they could burn, and that Dresden possessed in full measure. Any ordinary tourist guide made that obvious; indeed this vulnerability was built into the history of the city.” [18]

Historian Richard J. Evans disputes the statement in the USAF Historical Division report that the railway bridges over the Elbe River “were rendered unusable and remained closed to traffic for many weeks after the raids.” Evans writes, “Even the main railway line remained severed for only four days.” [19] Historian Alan Levine also states that the railway attacks at Dresden were not effective because rail service was restored to Dresden in three days. [20] Historian Sönke Neitzel agrees, “The railway lines were out of action for only a few days.” [21]

Philosopher A.C. Grayling examines questions that might be asked about the bombing of Dresden:

Given that the chief point of bombing Dresden was its importance as a transport hub close to a region where crucial military events were unfolding, why was the bombing effort not directed at the railways and roads in the environs of the city, or leading to and from the city along the crucial west-east axis? The

aiming-point issued to Bomber Command crews was not the railway yards, but a stadium close to the city center.

The city was known to be full of tens of thousands of refugees fleeing the approach of the Soviet troops. Was this a reason to bomb the city? Why was it not, on humanitarian grounds, a reason not to bomb the city?

Indeed, instead of asking what the reasons were for bombing the city (rather than others nearby also involved in the movement of troops and refugees), one might ask for the reasons not to bomb it, and the answer might have been the same that America's Secretary of State Henry Stimson gave when he struck Kyoto off the list of possible targets for atom-bomb attack. [22]

Thus, although Dresden was potentially a legitimate military target, the British bombers dispatched to Dresden on the night of February 13-14 had the task of simply destroying as much of the vital center of the city as possible. The attack on Dresden was about creating overwhelming disruption, with the intent of inflicting a complete state of chaos. While the destruction and disruption of industry in Dresden was significant, it was less than would have occurred if the British had systematically bombed the industrial suburbs. [23] The few military targets reported as damaged were relatively unimportant, and the death toll among the military was low (around 100 people). [24]

Sönke Neitzel writes: "In hindsight it is also perfectly clear that the Allies gained no military advantage as a result of their attack on Dresden. The bombing illustrates a degree of military incompetence on both sides. Neither side had the measure of the other. The Allies failed to appreciate Dresden's lack of importance. The Germans failed to appreciate the extent of the western Allies' power and ruthlessness." [25]

The bombing of Dresden was area bombing at its worst. The Dresden bombings were designed to kill tens of thousands of civilians at a time when Germany had already lost the war. A.C. Grayling asks and answers the following questions in regard to the area bombing of Dresden:

Was area bombing necessary? No.

Was it proportionate? No.

Was it against the humanitarian principles that people have been striving to enunciate as a way of controlling and limiting war? Yes.

Was it against general moral standards of the kind recognized and agreed in Western civilization in the last five centuries, or even 2,000 years? Yes.

Was it against what mature national laws provide in the way of outlawing murder, bodily harm, and destruction of property? Yes.

In short and in sum: was area bombing wrong? Yes.

Very wrong? Yes...

Should airmen have refused to carry out area-bombing raids? Yes. [26]

Conclusion

The Dresden bombings were not militarily justified. While there were some legitimate military targets in Dresden, the bombing of Dresden constituted area bombing at its worst. The British bombers especially were not interested in any purely military or strategic targets; instead, they concentrated on destroying as much of the vital center of Dresden as possible. The Dresden bombings trampled the humanitarian principles that nations have enacted as a way of controlling and limiting war.

Notes

[1] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, pp. 246-250.

[2] Friedrich, Jörg, *The Fire: The Bombing of Germany*, New York, Columbia University, 2006, pp. 16-17.

[3] De Bruhl, Marshall, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Random House, Inc., 2006, p. 156.

[4] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, pp. 256-257.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 267-269.

[6] *Ibid.*, pp. 274, 277-278.

[7] *Ibid.*, p. 284.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 7. See also <http://glossaryhesperado.blogspot.com/2008/04/facts-about-dresden-bombings.html>.

[9] Cox, Sebastian, "The Dresden Raids: Why and How," in Addison, Paul and Crang, Jeremy A., (eds.), *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, pp. 48-51.

[10] De Bruhl, Marshall, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Random House, Inc., 2006, pp. 280-281.

[11] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, p. 163.

[12] <http://glossaryhesperado.blogspot.com/2008/04/facts-about-dresden-bombings.html>.

[13] De Bruhl, Marshall, *Firestorm: Allied Airpower and the Destruction of Dresden*, New York: Random House, Inc., 2006, p. 281. See also <http://glossaryhesperado.blogspot.com/2008/04/facts-about-dresden-bombings.html>.

[14] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, p. 378.

[15] <http://glossaryhesperado.blogspot.com/2008/04/facts-about-dresden-bombings.html>.

[16] McKee, Alexander, *Dresden 1945: The Devil's Tinderbox*, New York: E.P. Dutton, Inc., 1984, pp. 69, 244.

[17] *Ibid.*, pp. 69-70, 243-244.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 70.

[19] Evans, Richard J., *Lying about Hitler: History, Holocaust, and the David Irving Trial*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 150.

[20] Levine, Alan J., *The Strategic Bombing of Germany, 1940-1945*, Westport, Conn., Praeger, 1992, p. 179.

[21] Neitzel, Sönke, "The City under Attack," in Addison, Paul and Crang, Jeremy A., (eds.), *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, p. 76.

[22] Grayling, A.C., *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan*, New York: Walker & Company, 2006, pp. 259-260.

[23] Taylor, Frederick, *Dresden: Tuesday, February 13, 1945*, New York: HarperCollins, 2004, pp. 218, 359.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 357.

[25] Neitzel, Sönke, "The City under Attack," in Addison, Paul and Crang, Jeremy A., (eds.), *Firestorm: The Bombing of Dresden, 1945*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006, p. 77.

[26] Grayling, A.C., *Among the Dead Cities: The History and Moral Legacy of the WWII Bombing of Civilians in Germany and Japan*, New York: Walker & Company, 2006, pp. 276-277.

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